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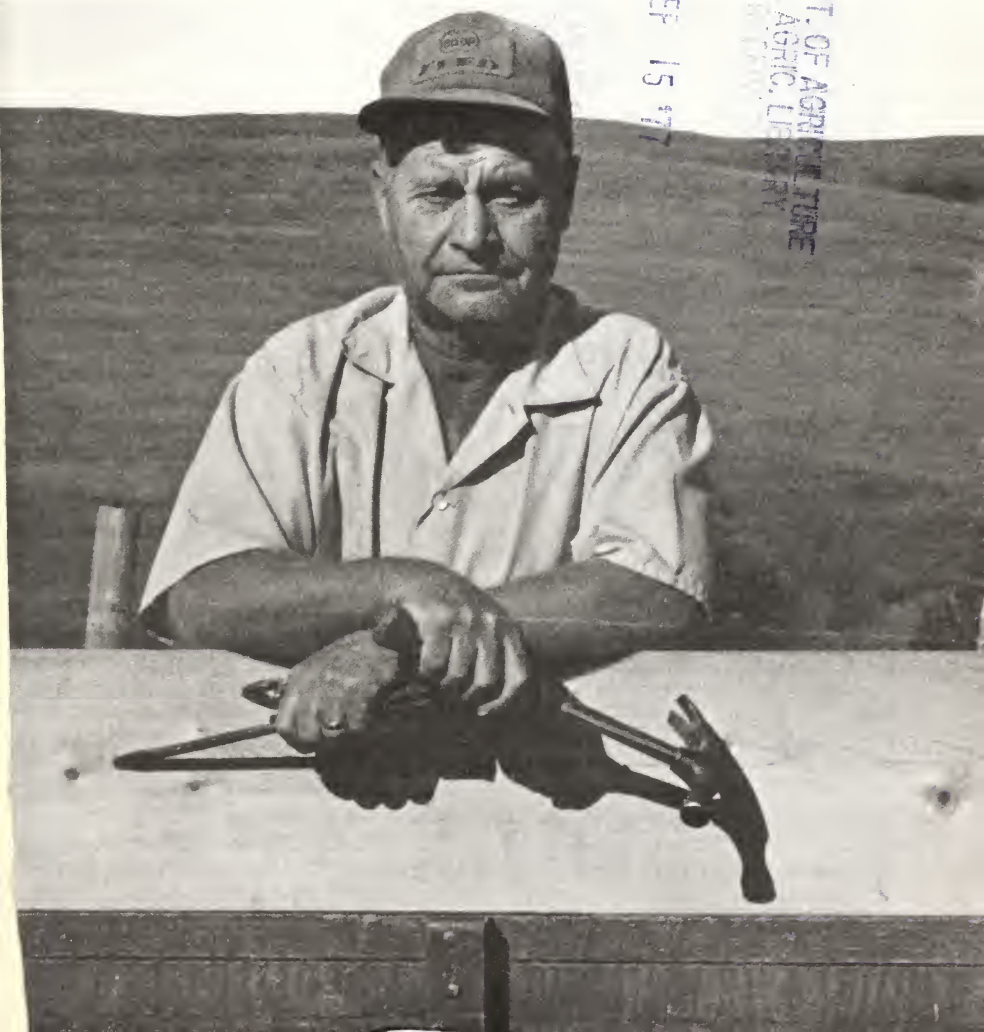
# agricultural situation

THE CROP REPORTERS MAGAZINE • JULY 1977  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE • STATISTICAL REPORTING SERVICE

FINANCIAL HARD TIMES FOR FARMERS

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# FINANCIAL HARD TIMES FOR FARMERS

*Opposite: Kansas wheat farmer copes with drought, a leading contributor to current economic woes.*

Stung by drought and low prices for cattle and wheat, farmers in nine States are facing financial hard times.

A recent survey of 400 bankers in the nine-State area revealed that a third of the farm operators borrowing from banks in the area—roughly 73,000 producers—have run into trouble repaying their loans.

States surveyed included Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas, an area encompassing nearly 685,000 farms, or about a fourth of the U.S. total.

Compounding the problem is that the people who live and work on these farms tend to rely heavily on farming for their livelihood. Last year, farm cash receipts in the nine States totaled \$26 billion, which worked out to 27 percent of the national figure.

According to local bankers, if depressed prices for wheat and livestock continue, more than 25 percent of their borrowers—about 59,000 producers—will be required to refinance current loans or liquidate certain farm assets in order to meet loan payments.

The lenders expected another 6 percent would be unable to repay their debts from anticipated income, and therefore face the prospect of selling out or dealing with further

action from creditors.

Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma—States particularly dependent on wheat and livestock production—showed the most widespread financial problems.

The bankers painted a generally gloomy picture of farm financial conditions throughout the entire survey area. . .

Three-fifths of the lenders said they found fewer farmers than usual in sound financial shape.

Over a third indicated that more than a normal share of producers would have to refinance their loans or liquidate assets.

Nearly two-fifths claimed that a bigger than usual share of borrowers could not repay.

The bankers indicated, however, that more than 9 in 10 borrowers in the nine-State area will be able to get further financing, either as additional loans or funds to refinance existing loans.

The bankers noted, however, that they will not supply additional credit to roughly 18 percent of the farmer-borrowers in Oklahoma, 8 percent in South Dakota, and 7 percent in North Dakota.

Generally, lenders cited poor income prospects and low equity as the main reason for refusing further credit. Only in the three hardest hit States—Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Kansas—did lack of loan money





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*Opposite: Low cattle prices and adverse weather have caught farmers in a real bind when loan payments come due. Many will be able to refinance short-term loans, but some face the prospect of selling out. For grain producers, drought and dust-covered crops have meant a smaller harvest for sale at depressed prices.*

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surface as a major reason for turning down requests for additional financing.

As of last March 31, total dollar volume of bank loans in the nine States stood 17 percent higher than a year earlier. Agricultural loans not secured by real estate were up 19 percent. At the same time, total deposits had risen only 11 percent.

Close to half the bankers told survey enumerators that their banks had more outstanding loans than desired in relation to total deposits—a situation that could force them to reduce lending to insure bank stability.

While most bankers reported they could still lend money, many noted that credit may get harder to come by because of the already large loan volume and slackening pace of deposits. One banker put it this way: "Since the cash flow from the sale of commodities has been reduced, the banking system in Nebraska is more heavily loaned at this time than it has been for several years."

Information from the Farm Credit Administration sheds further light on the financial plight of farmers. Between February 1976 and February 1977, the dollar volume of loans by Production Credit Associations (PCA's) in the nine-State survey area climbed about 14 percent. The PCA's also reported a rise in the number of farmers seeking

loans due to a financial pinch.

USDA economists point out that the current financial squeeze could extend beyond the farm gate and into surrounding communities if current conditions persist. Local merchants have already seen receipts drop as farmers delay purchases and put limits on their usual buying habits. Less income to area retailers and other businessmen could eventually lead to reduced employment and a generally depressed situation.

Lower farm income and the potential for a decline in land values could also spell a drop in area real estate, sales, and income taxes—leaving local governments no alternative but to cut public services.

Economists base these conclusions on data collected last April 12-14, when, amid reports of deteriorating financial conditions among farmers in drought-stricken areas, Agriculture Secretary Bob Bergland requested a survey and analysis of the situation.

SRS enumerators gathered the information entirely by telephone interviews with bankers in the affected States. The lenders represented 400 banks that were randomly selected from a list of over 1,600 banks in States having a heavy concentration of counties named as drought emergency areas by the Farmers Home Administration.



## MAPLE SIRUP: AN AMPLE FLOW

Pancakes and waffles won't be lonely this year. Maple sirup output is estimated at over 1.2 million gallons, a 32-percent leap over 1976.

Although maple sirup production has shown a small, but steady, rise since 1972, consumption has declined markedly. In 1966, for example, U.S. consumers used nearly 35 million pounds of maple sirup and sugar. But by 1974, less than 22.5 million pounds were headed for the American breakfast table.

USDA economists have singled out several reasons why pure maple sirup consumption has dropped steadily, with few exceptions, since the early part of the century. First dwindling production, coupled with a high price per pound relative to sugar, has tended to keep pure maple sweeteners out of the household.

In 1975, pure maple sirup was the highest priced natural sweetener in the country, averaging \$10.50 per gallon at the farm. This year, prices reached a record high of \$11.67 per gallon, according to SRS' annual Maple Sirup report. Imitation

maple-flavored sirups and blended sirups that use a relatively small amount of pure maple also have contributed to lowered demand.

Maple sirup farms fell from 28,000 in 1949 to about 5,000 in 1975. But increasing production since the 1972 low, more people moving into traditional maple sirup areas and taking up production, as well as higher prices and stepped-up demand for natural foods, have given comeback hopes to maple farmers.

The past sugaring season in New England proved short but productive. In late March, producers using buckets, rather than plastic tubing, couldn't keep up with the sap flow. New York's heavy snow cover kept producers from reaching some of the deeper bush areas, but weather helped preserve sirup quality.

The season in Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania was more productive though shorter. Wisconsin reported record output even though weather conditions were not the best. Sap sweetness and color turned out average or better in all areas.

Eight of the nine maple sirup States increased production last season; Massachusetts equalled its 1976 output.





## TRADE AGAIN WITH CUBA?

Improved relations with Cuba could be a boon for U.S. farmers.

Before trade relations broke off in 1959, Cuba was our top Latin American customer for farm goods and the seventh biggest market worldwide. Analysts say that Cuba could again become a major importer of U.S. commodities if the two countries are able to patch over past difficulties and if Cuba's foreign debt situation eases up.

Last year, Cuba imported \$760 million worth of food products plus sizable shares of cotton, vegetable oils, and other raw farm products. According to the experts, the United States could gain at least a third of this market.

Moreover, U.S. farms could probably supply over two-thirds of Cuba's farm trade, considering its mix: items like wheat, corn, and cotton, which are major American exports that can be delivered to Cuban ports at highly competitive prices.

However, since the collapse in trade relations, Cuba has developed strong trade ties with other nations, including Canada, Argentina, and more notably, the Soviet Union and East Europe. During the late 1950's, U.S. exporters supplied over 65 percent of total trade. But last year, Cuban trade with Communist countries made up over 70 percent of the total.

Another wrinkle is that Cuba has

incurred a \$4.6 billion debt with the Soviet Union, which could hinder trade with Western countries. Cuba also owes more than \$1 billion in hard currency to Western trading partners, which may pose even greater problems.

Nonetheless, there's potential for Cuba to import sizable amounts of several U.S. commodities, among them. . .

*Wheat:* Cuban wheat and flour imports are expected to hold at about 900,000 metric tons a year. Canada supplies the lion's share, but U.S. wheat could be competitive, given its freight advantage.

*Rice:* These imports usually run 250,000 to 300,000 tons a year, helping to make Cubans the biggest per capita consumers of rice in Latin America. While the Chinese and Soviets have supplied large amounts in recent years, U.S. long grain varieties were preferred in the past.

*Coarse grains:* Consisting mostly of corn, the bulk comes mainly from Argentina, with total imports averaging 300,000 tons a year. But the freight advantage could give U.S. corn a competitive edge.

*Pulses:* Once a major supplier of pulses to the island, the U.S. may be capable of selling 20,000 to 80,000 tons there today.

*Vegetable oils:* The roughly 65,000 tons that Cuba buys each year consist mainly of USSR sunflower oil. U.S. vegetable oils could be a reasonable substitute.

*Cotton:* A substantial share of this market—currently estimated at 100,000 bales—could be easily filled by the United States.

*Other products:* During 1955-59, U.S. exporters shipped Cuba some \$14.2 million a year in lard, cured pork, cheese, butter, and processed milk. Besides recapturing some of this trade, the United States stands to penetrate Cuba's new market for breeding cattle, poultry breeding stock, and hatching eggs.

# FARMING COST MORE IN '76

Farmers dug deeper into their pockets last year to get products to market. SRS's latest survey of U.S. farm production expenditures shows they spent more than \$89.2 billion in total outlays, up 9 percent from 1975 to an average of \$32,165 per farm.

Feed purchases took the biggest bite again in 1976. Nearly 16 percent of the budget went to feed, which increased by .7 percent to \$14.1 billion. Livestock and poultry production, also major expenditures, accounted for 8 percent of the total or \$7.2 billion.

Farmers found rent payments the second biggest wallet thinner. Slightly more than 9 percent covered rent, a slight drop from nearly 10 percent in 1975. However, wages and contract labor crept higher—it cost \$7.4 billion to hire help in 1976, up \$1.1 billion from 1975.

Of the sixteen categories covered in the SRS survey, eight declined in cost and one, taxes, remained the same. Excluding those items already mentioned, the production budget breaks down like this. . .

*Fertilizer, lime, and soil conditioners.* A small decline—U.S. farmers spent \$7.2 billion.

*Farm services.* Caused a frown—increased insurance and marketing expenses helped push the total to \$6.3 billion, .8 percent above 1975.

*Farm and motor supplies.* A welcome turn downward—producers paid out \$209 million less for these.

*Fuels and energy.* As might be expected—prices rose \$718 million to over \$5 billion.

*Building and fencing.* New construction meant higher costs—farmers shelled out nearly 6 percent of total expenditures for farm improvements.

*Interest.* Took a dip—interest paid

dropped \$67 million to total \$4.7 billion.

*Autos, trucks, tractors, self-propelled machinery, & other motor vehicles.* Paid more to keep rolling—rose nearly 1 percent to \$6.5 billion.

*Seeds & plants.* Down some—the \$2.5 billion spent was a bit below 1975 costs.

*Agricultural chemicals.* Last and smallest expenditure grouping—took slightly less than \$2 billion, down from 1975.

## CROP CHECK

Moving into the peak of the 1977 growing season, it's still anyone's guess how much will be harvested, marketed, and what each crop will be worth.

But when it's all over, and producers want to measure this year's performance against a year earlier, SRS's annual Field Crops report gives all the details. Some of the highlights from 1976. . .

Farmers produced a record 6.2 billion bushels of corn and expect to receive a national average price of \$2.32 a bushel, versus \$2.64 a year earlier. While total production was valued at \$14 billion, sales totaled \$9.3 billion, as a little over a third of the crop may be used on farms where produced.

In a similar situation, a record wheat crop in 1976 drove prices from 1975's \$3.55 a bushel to \$2.85. Farmers sold more than 95 percent of the crop for an estimated \$5.8 billion.

As for sorghum, producers harvested less than in 1975, but prices nonetheless dipped by 30 cents a bushel to \$2.07, reflecting the surge in corn output. Total output carried a value of \$1.5 billion. Farmers expect to keep a fourth of the crop and sell the remainder for \$1.1 billion.

The soybean harvest dropped by more than 280 million bushels last year, boosting prices from under \$5 a bushel in 1975 to an average of \$7.32.



## PUTTING WEATHER ON THE LINE

Reducing the risk of crop loss or damage is what it's all about. In a joint effort, USDA's Extension Service and the Commerce Department's National Weather Service have developed a pilot project to help farmers plan their cropping activity using information tailored to their county.

Data will be gathered and analyzed by the National Weather Service and agricultural experts, who will determine optimum times for harvesting, irrigating, and other farm operations. For example, entomologists can predict insect outbreaks by monitoring local weather conditions. Without the proper conditions, insects can't appear in numbers large enough to cause damage. Spraying, therefore, would be unnecessary.

The program depends on citizen volunteers throughout a State who will punch in observations by telephone to a computer that collects the coded signals automatically. The observers will report data on the

maximum and minimum temperatures and precipitation during the previous 24 hours and the weather conditions at time of observation. They'll also transmit special reports on changing weather activity.

Forecasters will make recommendations to farmers based on "ground truth" information gathered from the computer linkup.

Right now, Maryland is the only State using the experimental system. Eighty volunteers in 20 counties call in data. Nearly a dozen additional States will participate soon.

Drought States are getting special attention in another phase of the project. Cooperative State extension personnel have been assigned to work directly with a counterpart in the nearest Weather Service office, telling what farming operations are underway at a particular time and what types of weather would affect the operations and how. Forecasters then will tell farmers when such conditions are likely to occur.



# SURVEYSCOPE

***To give our readers a clearer picture of the vast scope of SRS activities, Agricultural Situation presents a series of articles on special surveys undertaken in various States. While these are not national surveys, they are important to the agriculture in individual States.***

"Wisconsin may be the country's biggest supplier of beer," claims Jim Kitterman, Washington agricultural statistician, "but without the hops that are grown here in the State of Washington, Milwaukee's famed breweries would face some tough adjustments."

Hops, of course, are the ingredient that gives beer its characteristic taste and aroma. Though it takes less than a quarter of a pound to make a full 31-gallon barrel of beer, hops are so essential to beermaking that the U.S. brewing industry would virtually grind

to a halt without them.

"Washington usually produces over two-thirds of the hops grown in this country," says Kitterman. "Production centers in the Yakima Valley, where rich volcanic soils, a temperate climate, and abundant sunlight provide ideal growing conditions. It's been said that if the Yakima Valley were a country by itself, it would be the second largest hop producing nation in the world, trailing only West Germany."

Each year, Kitterman's office makes



Airplane dusts Washington hop yard, where vines shoot up trellises some 18 feet high. . .



production forecasts during the growing season from August through October. The Hop Administrative Committee helps in this effort by providing early-season figures on planted acreage.

In late July and late August, Kitterman's office sends mail surveys to all known hop producers asking crop conditions and yield prospects as of August 1 and September 1. Growers who fail to respond are either telephoned or personally visited by survey enumerators.

The data from hop producers serve as a basis for estimating yield per acre, which is then applied to the acreage figures to develop production forecasts for August and September.

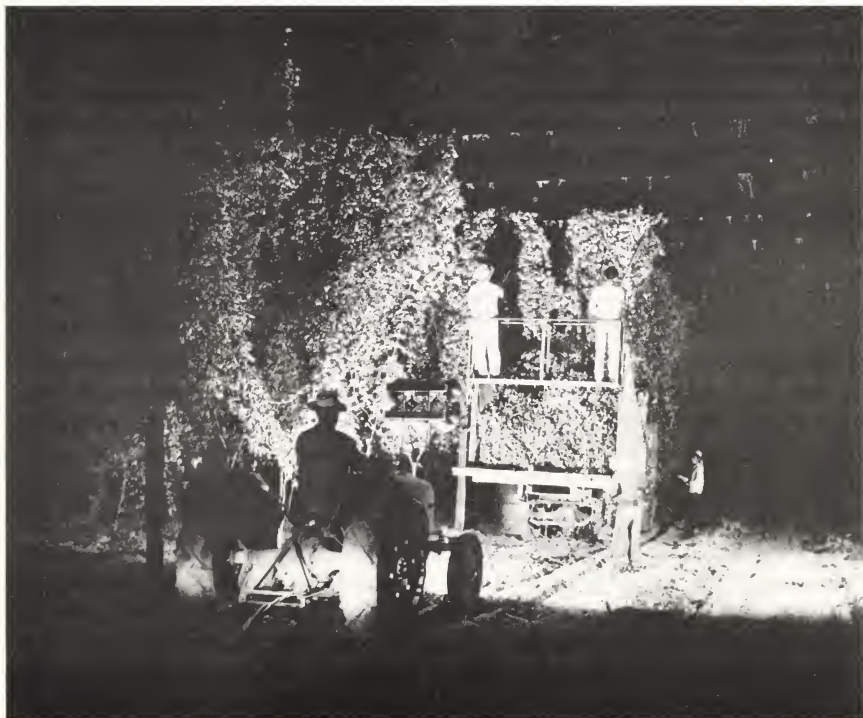
"As a rule," Kitterman explains, "the hop harvest gets underway in late August and is completed in a 1-month stretch. Last year, for example, growers in the lower Yakima Valley began harvesting around August 23

and had just about all of the crop in by September 24. During harvesting, producers virtually work around the clock cutting the 18-foot vines and trellises, and hauling them to stationary picking machines that strip off the hops."

Besides releasing production estimates on a Statewide basis, Kitterman's office forwards the figures to Washington, D.C., where they're combined with data from Oregon, Idaho, and California for an estimate of total U.S. output.

Last year, Washington growers supplied 71 percent of the Nation's hop harvest, or 41.2 million of the 57.8 million pounds produced. While they planted about 300 fewer acres than in 1975, they nonetheless came up with a record crop, as yield per acre shot to an alltime high of 1,960 pounds.

Producers averaged 82½ cents a pound, turning in a total Washington crop valued at nearly \$34 million.



...until late August, when crews begin working around the clock to get the crop in.

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# Briefings

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RECENT REPORTS BY USDA OF ECONOMIC, MARKETING, AND RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING FARMERS.

**THE WORLD'S GRANARY.** . .USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) reports that by mid-1978, world grain stocks may reach a record high of 202 million metric tons. Behind the expected record is a large upturn in stocks during 1976/77—now estimated at 54 million tons over a year earlier—and prospects for another gain in 1977/78. FAS projects the 1977/78 world grain harvest at 1,087 million tons, down from last year's alltime high, but still the second biggest crop on record. Barring any major weather problems, production will probably top consumption by around 30 million tons.

**FROM THE FIELDS.** . .Farmers harvested 3% more fresh market vegetables, including melons, in 1976 than the previous year, according to SRS's Crop Reporting Board. The 22 principal produce items were planted on 1.6 million acres, yielding an estimated 246.4 million hundredweight. The crop's value was put at nearly \$2,251 million, a 5% increase over 1975.

**MAPPING THE MARSHES.** . .The Departments of Agriculture and Interior are pooling resources to inventory and map wetlands in the U.S. and its territories. This project, the first since 1954, will use a new classification system to determine relationships between kinds of soils, types of wetlands and vegetation, and the animals that inhabit these areas. Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service expects the revamped system will reach a broad audience including wildlife managers, hydrologists, landscape planners, economists, engineers, and public and private agencies.

**FERTILE LAND.** . .Commercial fertilizer use advanced 15% in the U.S. and Puerto Rico during the year ended June 30, 1976. Consumption of fertilizers containing one or more primary nutrients reached 46.8 million tons. The class breakdown showed increases of 23% for fluid fertilizer and 20% for dry bulk, which was the most popular type and made up 50% of all fertilizer used. Dry bagged fertilizer dipped 6%. SRS gathered the data from State Fertilizer Control Officials and approximately 1,500 manufacturers, blenders, and sales outlets.

**SALAD DAYS.** . . During 1975, per capita use of red meats rose in over half the 49 countries reporting such data. Notable exceptions were the U.S. and six other nations, which registered declines of more than 4 pounds a person. In the U.S.—where per capita use dropped nearly 7 pounds from 1974—as well as in Chile, Ireland, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom, reduced pork production caused the declines. Faced with high world grain prices in second-half 1974, producers cut back on breeding sows and reduced farrowings. When grain prices dipped in 1975, producers were unable to take advantage of the situation because of smaller breeding herds. Relatively low beef prices also discouraged pork production. U.S. consumers ate nearly 181 pounds of red meat in 1975, placing this country fifth among the 49 reporting nations; the top four were Uruguay, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand.

**SHIPPED BEEF.** . . World beef and veal exports could hit a new high this year, according to USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service. In their April forecast, commodity analysts predicted that the chief exporting nations would ship 2.33 million metric tons (carcass weight equivalent), a gain of roughly 220,000 tons from last year's alltime high. Top exporters include Australia, New Zealand, Central America, Mexico, Argentina, and Uruguay, which together provide more than 80% of the world's trade in beef and veal. Only New Zealand was not expected to surpass its record meat shipments of 1976.

**FARM OUTLAYS.** . . SRS estimates that last year, there were 2.8 million farms in the continental U.S. Only 7.6% of them had gross sales of \$100,000 or more, but they accounted for more than half of total farm expenditures. Those earning between \$40,000 and \$100,000 comprised 13.6% of all farms and paid out nearly 25% of expenditures. Almost 11% of all farms fell into the \$20-40,000 sales category and spent 9.4% of total outlays. While 68% of all farms reported sales below \$20,000, they accounted for slightly more than 15% of total expenditures.

**BEEF IN VOLUME.** . . A large share of the beef-buying public seeks economy through volume. So said USDA's Economic Research Service after a recent survey of 1,400 households. About 20% purchased beef in bulk. Most of those who bought 20 pounds or more said they saved money; 44% mentioned the convenience of maintaining a good supply, and one-third noted better quality in volume buying. Supermarkets got most of the business for beef cuts while farms were the primary source of carcasses, sides, and forequarters. The most numerous bulk beef consumers were from large families, were more evident in the North Central region, and were from households with incomes of more than \$15,000.

**MORE TART CHERRIES.** . .U.S. tart cherry production is expected to climb 46% over last year's freeze-ravaged crop, but the harvest will remain below average, according to SRS's Crop Reporting Board. The Board estimates the current crop at 211.1 million pounds, off the 1975 mark by 27%. Hit by late spring frosts, Michigan growers will probably take in 165 million pounds of tart cherries, versus only 90 million last year, but 222 million the year before. New York's crop endured adverse weather at every stage of development, leaving a crop estimated at 11 million tons, down from last year and less than half the 1975 output. Untimely freezes also struck Pennsylvania, reducing the State's crop to 3.2 million pounds, or about a fourth of the 1975 harvest.

**FEWER SWEET ONES.** . .Freezes also shoulder much of the blame for a sharply smaller sweet cherry crop. At an estimated 127,000 tons, this year's crop is down 25% from 1976 and the smallest crop in 5 years. Production has slipped in every major producing State except Michigan. The Pacific States—which normally supply three-fourths of the Nation's sweet cherries—expect output to be off a third from last year.

**TOBACCO HIGHLIGHTS.** . .Sluggish cigarette sales and lagging tobacco exports have combined to slow tobacco use, report USDA economists. For the 10 months ended April 1977, domestic cigarette use rose only about 1%; exports climbed 5%. As a result, economists expected tobacco carryover as of July 1 to rise some 250 million pounds over the 3.25 billion on hand a year earlier. Cigarette production for the year ended June 30 was probably slightly below the 688 billion produced last fiscal year, but gains in cigarette sales and inventories should help boost production in second-half 1977.

**POTENT PEPPER.** . .A plant pest may find pepper a bit too spicy for its taste. USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) has found black pepper and its alcoholic extract to be toxic to rice and cowpea weevils that attack stored food products. Even at the lowest dosage, it proved effective against rice weevils feeding on soft winter wheat. ARS scientists anticipate a promising future for pepper as a safe, naturally occurring insecticide.

**MOTOR VEHICLE PRICES TURN HIGHER.** . .Farmers who bought cars and trucks last May paid roughly 5% more than they would have spent for the same vehicles the previous November, according to the Crop Reporting Board. SRS's mid-May price survey showed that both new and used cars and trucks bore bigger price tags, although increases were heftier for used vehicles. Previously owned cars averaged \$2,090, up \$200 from 6 months earlier, while used  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton pickup trucks were up \$300.



# Statistical Barometer

Item	1975	1976	1977—latest available data	
<b>Farm Food Market Basket:<sup>1</sup></b>				
Retail cost (1967=100)	174	175	178	May
Farm value (1967=100)	187	179	181	May
Farmer's share of retail cost (percent)	42	40	39	May
<b>Agricultural Trade:</b>				
Agricultural exports (\$bil.)	22	23	2.2	May
Agricultural imports (\$bil.)	10	11	1.3	May
<b>Hogs and Pigs:</b>				
Hogs and pigs on farms, June 1 (mil.)	48.2	54.1	54.1	June
Kept for breeding (mil.)	7.4	8.4	8.6	June
Market (mil.)	40.8	45.6	45.5	June
Sows farrowing, Dec.-May (mil.)	5.0	5.8	6.1	June
Pig crop, Dec.-May (mil.)	35.5	42.2	43.1	June
Pigs per litter, Dec.-May (number)	7.2	7.3	7.1	June
<b>Prices:</b>				
Consumer price index, all items (1967=100)	161.2	170.5	179.6	April
Food (1967=100)	175.4	180.8	190.9	April
Food away from home (1967=100)	174.3	186.1	197.5	April
Food at home (1967=100)	175.8	179.5	189.3	April
Meats <sup>2</sup>	177.9	178.2	170.1	April
Beef and veal	170.0	164.5	161.2	April
Pork	196.9	199.5	181.7	April
Poultry	162.4	155.7	157.7	April
Fish	203.3	227.3	244.0	April
Eggs	157.8	172.4	166.0	April
Dairy products <sup>3</sup>	156.6	169.3	171.4	April
Fats and oils <sup>4</sup>	198.6	173.7	183.5	April
Fruits and vegetables	171.0	175.4	203.0	April

<sup>1</sup>Average annual quantities per family and single person households bought by wage and clerical workers, 1960-61, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics figures.

<sup>2</sup>Beef, veal, lamb, mutton, pork, and processed meat.

<sup>3</sup>Includes butter.

<sup>4</sup>Excludes butter



Crop  
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